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THE NAVY'S PART IN THE ACQUISITION OF
CALIFORNIA, 1846-1848.

By ROBERT WILDEN NEESER.

Although the war between the United States and Mexico actually began on April 24, 1846, the relations between the two countries for the past two years had been daily becoming more and more strained.¹ As early as October, 1842, Commodore John D. Sloat, who commanded the American squadron in the Pacific ocean, had received intelligence which induced him to believe that Mexico had declared war against the United States;² he accordingly took possession of the town and bay of Monterey, but two days later withdrew his forces upon learning that the relations between the two nations were still peaceful. On the 24th of June, 1845, he received confidential instructions from the Secretary of the Navy, George Bancroft, calling his "attention to the present aspect of the relations between this country and Mexico," notifying him that it was the earnest desire of the President to pursue a policy of peace, and directing him to be "assiduously careful to avoid any act of aggression."³ But, at the same time, if Mexico should be "resolutely bent on hostilities," he should at once employ the forces under his command to the best advantage; and one of his first acts should be to take possession of the port of San Francisco, and occupy or blockade such other Mexican ports in the Pacific, which were generally open and defenseless, as his forces might warrant. Should he occupy San Francisco and other Mexican ports, he was to take care to preserve, if possible, the most friendly relations with the inhabitants, and, if practicable, induce them to adopt a course of neutrality. In his report to the Presi-

¹ Burgess, 329.

² Capron, 37.

³ Letter of Geo. Bancroft to Com. Sloat, Report Sec. of Navy (1846), 378.

dent, the Secretary of the Navy says that Commodore Sloat "observed the line of conduct prescribed to him with such intelligence and fidelity that no complaint has ever been made of any unauthorized aggression on his part."

On May 13, 1846, Secretary Bancroft wrote again to the commodore, informing him that the events alluded to in his letter of June, 1845, had taken place, and directing him to carry out the instructions then given him with "energy and promptitude."⁴ Long before these orders could reach the Pacific coast, Commodore Sloat had acted with all the required energy and promptitude.

On June 7, 1846, while lying at Mazatlan, he had received conclusive information through Mexico,⁵ "that the Mexican troops, six or seven thousand strong, had, by order of the Mexican government, invaded the territory of the United States, north of the Rio Grande, and had attacked the forces under General Taylor, and that the squadron of the United States was blockading the ports of Mexico on the Gulf." Properly considering these hostilities as justifying his commencing offensive operations on the west coast,⁶ he, on the following day, sailed in the frigate *Sarannah* for the coast of California. He reached Monterey on the 2d of July, and there found the *Cyane* and *Levant*, which had been previously ordered forward, awaiting the outbreak of hostilities.

Upon his arrival, however, the commodore found that the spirit manifested towards the Americans was so different from what he had expected to find, that he hesitated for several days to raise the American flag over the town. But on July 6, he decided to assume the responsibility of such an act, preferring, as he himself expressed it, to be sacrificed, if he had to be, "for doing too much than too little."

On the following morning, July 7, 1846, he sent Captain Mervine on shore with a summons to the military commandant of Monterey, for its immediate surrender to the United States. Receiving an unfavorable reply, the commodore landed a force of two hundred and fifty sailors and marines, which took possession of the town and hoisted the American flag over the custom house.⁷ In his proclamation to the inhabitants, Sloat said that henceforth

⁴ Hittell, 458.

⁵ Official Report of Com. Sloat to Secretary of Navy, July 31, 1846.

⁶ Report of Secretary of Navy, 1846, p. 378.

⁷ Report of Com. Sloat to Secretary of Navy, July 31, 1846. Report of the Secretary of the Navy to the President, 1846, p. 640.

California would be a portion of the United States, and that its peaceful inhabitants would enjoy all the rights and protection granted to American citizens.⁸

Such were the circumstances of the seizure of California by the United States. It was a war measure; but it was a measure contemplated and determined on before the war. It was a seizure with the intention and for the purpose of holding the country permanently as a conquest. There were elements of violence and aggression in the purposes of those who planned. But in some important respects it differed from other conquests of foreign territory which the world has witnessed. It was a conquest, advantageous indeed to the conquerors, but no less so to the conquered. It was a conquest by which the conquered were to be made a part and parcel of, and enjoy the same rights and privileges as, the conquerors. It was a conquest which could hardly have been possible in any other part of the globe or conceived by any other people than those of the United States. With the exception of the impracticable guaranty of the quiet possession of land held under mere color of right, every word of Sloat's proclamation was the voice of the United States speaking through him; and all that it promised, and more than all, was accomplished and effectuated by the result. For these reasons the document, little attention as has hitherto been paid to it, is one of the most interesting and significant state papers in the American archives.⁹

Meanwhile, on July 6, the day before the seizure of Monterey, the commodore had sent orders to Commander Montgomery, commanding the sloop-of-war *Portsmouth*, then stationed in the Bay of San Francisco, announcing to him his determination, and ordering him to hoist the flag of the United States at Yerba Buena (San Francisco) and to take possession of the surrounding country.¹⁰ Sloat's message reached Montgomery on July 8. The following morning a force was landed and the American flag hoisted in front of the custom house in the public square, amid the cheers of the assembled people.¹¹ When the ceremonies of taking possession were over, the seamen, with a small portion of the marines, returned to the ship, leaving Lieutenant Watson, with a small guard, as military occupants of the post. Soon after the withdrawal of the sailors, the male residents of Yerba Buena, capable of bearing arms, were called together, and enrolled into a volunteer company of thirty-two, which was to assist the United States forces in case of an attack by the enemy. In the afternoon of the

⁸ Proclamation of Com. Sloat to the inhabitants of California, July 7, 1846.

⁹ Hittell, 466.

¹⁰ Letter of Com. Sloat to Com. J. B. Montgomery, July 6, 1846.

¹¹ Report of Com. Montgomery to Com. Sloat, July 9, 1846. Report of Secretary of Navy to President, 1846, 640.

same day, a portion of the volunteers, under Lieut. T. S. Mosroon, took possession of the fort at the entrance of the harbor. Notwithstanding the fact that the fort was in a delapidated condition, the American flag was raised on its ramparts; and from that time on the Stars and Stripes have maintained their "sleepless watch" over the Golden Gate.

On the same day that Commander Montgomery took possession of Yerba Buena, a detachment under Lieut. J. W. Revere landed at the town of Sonoma and occupied it;¹² and two days later Montgomery was able to report to his superior that the United States flag was then flying also at Sutter's fort on the Sacramento, and at Bodega on the coast; and that everywhere, on account of the protection it promised to persons and property, it had been hailed with satisfaction.¹³

Immediately after seizing Monterey, Commodore Sloat despatched a courier to General Jose Castro,¹⁴ the military commandant of California, with a copy of his proclamation and a letter, demanding the immediate surrender of all the troops, arms and public property under his control, so as to prevent the sacrifice of human life and the horrors of war which might otherwise become inevitable.¹⁵ At the same time he invited him to a conference at Monterey to arrange the terms of a capitulation, and receive for himself, and his troops, with the people of California, "assurances of perfect safety to themselves and property." To this letter Castro replied two days later, but instead of answering the propositions contained in it, he devoted his entire paper to certain occurrences which had taken place at Sonoma.¹⁶

While this correspondence was going on, the commodore hit upon the excellent idea of organizing a company of dragoons, in order to keep open the communications between Monterey and San Francisco, and to protect the people of the country from violence.¹⁷ This force consisted of thirty-five men, and was placed under the command of Purser D. Fauntleroy. On the 17th of July, Fauntleroy was ordered to reconnoitre the country between San Jose and San Juan Baptista, and to hoist the American flag at the latter place. Upon his arrival, however, he found the town

¹² Report of Lieut. Revere to Com. Montgomery, July 11, 1846.

¹³ Report of Com. Montgomery to Com. Sloat, July 11, 1846.

¹⁴ Report of Com. Sloat to Secretary of Navy, July 31, 1846.

¹⁵ Letter of Com. Sloat to Don Jose Castro, July 7, 1846.

¹⁶ Letter of Don J. Castro to Com. J. Sloat, July 9, 1846.

¹⁷ Report of Com. Sloat to Secretary of Navy, July 31, 1846.

already in possession of Captain Fremont. The two then marched back to Monterey; and from that time on the country was in the quiet and undisputed possession of the United States forces.¹⁸

However peaceable the condition of these lately acquired possessions may have seemed to the conquerors, yet to the Californians it did not appear in the same light. Many of them, especially that portion of them who were most hostile to the Americans, firmly believed that the British would interfere and side with them against the invaders. But they were soon undeceived. Whatever may have been the designs of the British Admiral, Sir George F. Seymour, he gave no trouble to the Americans. About a week after Sloat's arrival at Monterey, he sailed into the harbor with his flagship, the 80-gun ship *Collingwood*, and was immediately tended the "usual courtesies and facilities of the port" by the American commodore. The friendly intercourse and reciprocal exchange of kindness subsisting between the two, firmly convinced the Californians of the uselessness of their hopes, and they "abandoned all hope of ever seeing the Mexican flag fly in California again."¹⁹

Previous to this, on July 11, the British 26-gun ship *Juno* had sailed into the Bay of San Francisco,²⁰ and anchored at San Solita. On her appearance, Commander Montgomery made preparations to defend his post, but the British commander, after staying a few days, sailed without showing any intentions of interference; and a few days subsequently—July 23—Admiral Seymour left Monterey for the Sandwich Islands.²¹ Thus, though some apprehensions were still felt of opposition on the part of England, the British naval officers in the Pacific had not shown any disposition to interfere; and there was nothing for the Californians to do but to submit or fight their battle alone.²²

On July 15, the day before Seymour's arrival, the U. S. frigate *Congress*, Commodore R. F. Stockton, reached Monterey.²³ Stockton reported for duty to Commodore Sloat; but the latter's health was in such a precarious state that he determined to relinquish

¹⁸ Hittel, 572; Ex. Doc., 2, Sess. 30, Cong. HR. No. 1, p. 1008.

¹⁹ Report of Com. Sloat to Secretary of Navy, July 31, 1846.

²⁰ Report of Com. Montgomery to Com. Sloat, July 11, 1846.

²¹ Report of Com. Sloat to Secretary of Navy, July 31, 1846. Hittell, 573.

²² Ex. Doc., 2, Sess. 30, Cong. HR. No. 1, pp. 1008, 1020, 1028, 1030.

²³ Report of Com. Stockton to Secretary of Navy, July 31, 1846; NAVAL INSTITUTE PROCEEDINGS, 420.

his command to the former, and return to the United States. He accordingly, on July 23, transferred the command of the squadron to Stockton, and on the 29th sailed for the United States.²⁴

Commodore Sloat, in transferring the command of the squadron in the Pacific to Stockton, had directed him "to assume command of the forces and operations on shore."²⁴ Stockton immediately raised a body of 160 volunteers, known as the "Battalion of California Volunteers,"²⁵ and placed them under the command of Captain Fremont. On the same day—July 23—Fremont was ordered to embark with his troops on board the ship *Cyane*, Com. S. F. DuPont, which was to convey them to San Diego.²⁶ The purpose of this expedition was to cut off the retreat of General Castro, and thereby prevent his escape across the Colorado river into Sonora. But unfortunately, when Fremont reached San Diego, he was unable to procure any horses to mount his men, and although he had arrived on the 29th of July, it was not until the 8th of August that he was able to move.²⁷

In the meanwhile, Stockton had sailed in the *Congress* for San Pedro, U. C. On the way he landed at Santa Barbara, of which he took possession, and leaving a small force for its defense, he proceeded to San Pedro, where he arrived on the 6th of August. A force of 400 men and some artillery was immediately landed, which captured the place.²⁸ The following day two commissioners, empowered to enter into negotiations for a cessation of hostilities, arrived from General Castro. They demanded, however, as a preliminary to treating, that Stockton should not leave his present position, but this demand the commodore absolutely refused to grant. Preparations were at once begun for the march into the interior, and four days later the commodore left San Pedro for Los Angeles. The Californians had entrenched themselves about three miles from the city on the "table-land known as the Mesa."²⁹ On the 12th of August, as they were approaching this strong position, the Americans were met by another of Castro's envoys. He was commissioned to deliver a pompous message, informing the commodore "That if he marched

²⁴ Report of Com. Sloat to Secretary of Navy, July 31, 1846.

²⁵ Report of Com. Stockton to Secretary of Navy, Feb. 18, 1848.

²⁶ Naval Institute Proceedings, 420.

²⁷ Hittell, 583.

²⁸ Report of Com. Stockton to Secretary of Navy, Feb. 18, 1848.

²⁹ Life of Com. Stockton, 122; Hittell, 584.

upon the town he would find it the grave of his men." "Then," replied the old sailor, "tell your general to have the bells ready to toll in the morning at eight o'clock, as I shall be there at that time."³⁰

He arrived on time, but the Californian general was unwilling to risk a battle, and fled without awaiting the commodore's approach. Ciudad de los Angeles capitulated unconditionally, and, on the 13th of August, Stockton took possession of the capital of California.³¹

The effect of this successful expedition, though achieved without bloodshed, was equivalent to the most triumphant victory. The flight of Castro, the dispersion of his troops, the capture of Los Angeles, the dissolution of the legislature, and, indeed, of the government—by the flight of the general and governor-in-chief³¹—and the general submission of the inhabitants, apparently terminated all hostilities in California.³¹

Commodore Stockton was averse to the continuance of martial law after the submission of the people. But, as many of the civil authorities of the former government were unwilling to act under the new state of affairs, the commodore ordered an election to fill their places. The election was duly held (September 15) and the officers elected at once proceeded to the discharge of their duties. Major Fremont was appointed military commandant of the territory, and a battalion of volunteers raised. Thus in little more than a month after the expedition started from Monterey, the new government, civil and military, was organized and put in operation, with every indication that the people of California would acquiesce in submission to it without further resistance.³¹

Unfortunately this belief was badly founded, for no sooner had Commodore Stockton left Los Angeles, than Pico and Flores, regardless of their paroles not to serve again during the war, secretly collected the remnants of their scattered forces, and resolved upon another attempt to drive out the Americans.³¹

They began their operations by retaking Los Angeles, which had been garrisoned by a force of less than one hundred men under Major Gillespie. Santa Barbara was likewise captured, and San Diego closely besieged. Encouraged by these successes, Pico and Flores issued "a flaming proclamation, calling upon their countrymen to rise in defense of California, and drive out the

³⁰ Colton's 30 years in California.

³¹ Report of Com. Stockton to Secretary of Navy, Feb. 18, 1848.

insolent invaders from their soil. They pretty generally responded to the call, and an army of about a thousand mounted men was soon collected."^{31 32}

As soon as Commodore Stockton was informed of these events, he made prompt arrangements for quelling the insurrection. Colonel Fremont was summoned to San Francisco with his force of volunteers; and the commodore himself proceeded in the *Congress* to San Diego.

Upon his arrival there, he found the place still besieged, and the garrison reduced to severe straits. All the male inhabitants had abandoned the town, leaving the women and children dependent upon the Americans. In addition to these unfavorable circumstances, in attempting to enter the harbor, the *Congress* grounded and was in danger of tumbling over; and while a part of the crew was engaged in extricating her from her position, the enemy commenced an attack upon the town. A portion of the crew of the vessel was immediately landed, and, after a severe action, repulsed the enemy.³³

As soon as the ship could be gotten off, and securely anchored in the harbor, all the marines and sailors, that could be spared, were landed from the frigates *Congress* and *Savannah*, and preparations begun for the march on Ciudad de Los Angeles. On the 29th of December the advance was begun. The forces under Commodore Stockton consisted of about five hundred men. On the way (as usual) they were met by commissioners from Flores, with propositions for a truce, but these the commodore refused.³³ On January 8, 1847, upon reaching the San Gabriel river, about ten miles from Los Angeles, the enemy were discovered posted on the opposite bank of the stream.^{33 34} Their forces consisted of about six hundred mounted men and four pieces of artillery, advantageously posted on the bank about fifty feet above the level of the river. The Americans immediately crossed under a galling fire, and posted their guns on the opposite bank, from whence they opened fire upon the enemy. While the attacking party was being formed, some of the Californians charged upon their flank, but were met with so hot a reception that they fell back; and about the same time they withdrew their artillery also further back. The Americans then charged up the hill, but the enemy

³² Life of Com. R. F. Stockton, 128.

³³ Report of Com. Stockton to Secretary of Navy, Feb. 18, 1848.

³⁴ Report of Com. Stockton to Secretary of Navy, Feb. 5, 1847.

abandoned their position before they reached the top, leaving the victors in possession of the field, near which they encamped for the night.³⁵

On the following morning the Americans resumed their advance upon Los Angeles. After proceeding a few miles across the plains of the Mesa, the Californian cavalry appeared upon their flanks, and soon their main position came into view. As soon as the Americans came into range, their artillery opened fire, while their cavalry made a furious charge on both flanks. The Americans at once formed a square, and in this position easily repulsed the attack of the enemy; who then retired northward.³⁵ The Americans continued to advance and on the morning of the 10th of January, 1847, they took possession of the capital.

These two battles, of San Gabriel and the Mesa, decided the fate of California. The people made a brave and gallant effort to maintain the supremacy of Mexico, and had they had better leaders, they surely would have succeeded. Their scattered forces, still under Flores, a few days after their defeat, met the American "California battalion" under Colonel Fremont, and, being unable to offer any assistance, were compelled to surrender. By the terms of the capitulation—treaty of Corvanga—the Californians were pardoned for all past hostilities, were free to go to their homes on giving up their public arms, and promising not to take up arms again during the war. They were guaranteed protection, with all the privileges of American citizens, without being required to take the oath of allegiance.³⁶ This last blow effectually broke the spirit of resistance to American authority.

Such was the occupation of California. In the opinion of Burgess, it was of the most vital importance to the United States. It is the way to Asia. Its government by Mexico was a farce. It would have been purchased or seized by Great Britain, or some other commercial power, if the United States had not taken possession of it. Nothing was known of its vast mineral wealth at the time. Mere greed therefore, did not prompt the movement. It was a great and correct stroke of public policy, supported by geographical, commercial, and political reasons.³⁷

³⁵ Report of Com. Stockton to Secretary of Navy, Feb. 5, 1847, and Feb. 18, 1848.

³⁶ Copy of the Articles of Capitulation, in Report of Secretary of Navy to the President, 1848, p. 1067.

³⁷ Burgess, 332.

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